

AWARENESS AND ATTITUDES ABOUT DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The Office on Violence Against Women (OVW), in collaboration with the Polling Company, Inc., conducted two focus groups and a telephone poll of 600 women in June, 2006 to find out how they viewed the crime of domestic violence. The results of this survey research are summarized below.

UNDERSTANDING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The majority of survey respondents and focus group participants had a noteworthy command of issues related to domestic violence. When asked directly, most women agreed that domestic violence in the U.S. is a serious problem. Still, the issue did not flow freely when women were asked to cite the most pressing challenges facing women in this country.

Further discussion revealed that this is fueled in part by the “out of sight, out of mind” mentality conveniently allowed by domestic violence, whose victims often

Six in ten women consider domestic violence a criminal issue.

suffer silently and without conspicuous physical markings. When asked whether domestic violence qualifies more as a criminal issue or a health issue, women were more than four times as likely to say that domestic violence is a criminal issue. The

overwhelming consensus among the participants was that any woman could be a victim of abuse regardless of race, age, socio-economic status, or place of residence.

The women studied had more than a general understanding of three different types of abuse:

Verbal Abuse: Nearly three out of four of the women surveyed said that name calling or put-downs on a regular basis constituted domestic violence and 44 percent suggested that even occasional harsh words counted. One in three insisted on something akin to a strict liability standard for the perpetrator, saying that put-downs and criticisms that did not hurt the other person’s feelings nonetheless should be considered domestic violence, a sentiment echoed by many women in the focus groups. To these women, verbal battery is a gateway to physical harm and should not be dismissed.

“...it is all in the context, the way it is said.”
-Jen, 27, Pittsburgh

Physical Abuse: The striking and battering of a woman is visible and most commonly associated with violence between intimate partners. That said, nearly all of the women interviewed acknowledged that conduct need not be physical to qualify as domestic violence. Three-fourths of women surveyed agreed that repeated threats to bring harm fit the definition.

Sexual Abuse: Focus group participants did not automatically connect sexual assault and domestic violence. However, nearly nine in ten of the respondents suggested that sexual coercion is included in the term when prompted. Unassisted, only one percent of women surveyed mentioned sexual abuse in their definition of domestic abuse.

"It has crossed the line when I am afraid of him. I am afraid he is going to hurt me. I don't know how he is going to be the next minute."

-Tina, 34, Philadelphia

More so than a particular word or deed, the women determined that it was pattern and regularity of the behavior that distinguished actual abuse from "relational conflict."

In the focus groups, the women implied that the severity of the problem was linked to whether it ultimately should be characterized as domestic violence.

POINTING THE FINGER OF BLAME

The majority of survey respondents agreed that the victim was never to blame for staying with an abuser. Instead, they recognized that victims may struggle with an extremely complex emotional, psychological, even monetary calculus before finally deciding to leave their abusers. Shame, low self-esteem, and fear of repercussions from the perpetrator as well as a financial inability to leave can combine to create a figurative prison that grips women. Still, one-third of women reported that some culpability belonged with the victim.

"They demeaned him so low, he thought the only power he had was over me."

-Lisa, 41, Pittsburgh

Most pinned the causes of domestic violence as a learned behavior, meaning the perpetrator witnessed this type of conduct in the home while growing up himself, had financial problems, suffered drug and alcohol abuse, or was unable to manage anger. However, these women were also keenly aware that many relationships experience these problems and other stressors,

and do not fall into the patterns of domestic violence.

WOMEN WANT TO HELP OTHERS

Of all the solutions and organizations discussed in the focus groups, women responded most positively toward the President's Family Justice Center Initiative and the National Domestic Violence Hotline. Survey respondents felt that shelters, a "hotline," and law enforcement were better options than any other. Women wishing to help, but unsure as

to the most effective ways to do so, can point a friend or family member in the direction of these resources without endangering themselves or “butting in.”

“First, I would offer my help. I would do whatever I can for them ... You have to find out more about what they are going through...are they comfortable going to a shelter? Does it warrant going to the police? Should they press charges? Find out how they feel, don’t convince them that they should stay, but find out what kind of help they need.”

-Noreen, 43, Pittsburgh

ENCOURAGING WOMEN TO “GET INVOLVED”

Nearly all of the focus group participants were personally willing to roll up their sleeves and volunteer to help women caught in the cycle of abuse. However, many of them also confided that when they were faced with an opportunity to assist a victim in the past, it was often after the victim had already hit “rock bottom” or actively solicited aid on her own.

NO SINGLE SOLUTION

Strikingly, no single resource was a runaway favorite amongst women when asked to choose the optimal solution. Types of community assistance (going to a shelter, calling a hotline, or calling the police) were given the distinction of “best” by more women than any of the other options (staying with a friend or family member, talking to church or religious leaders, talking to a counselor, or talking to a health professional). Nearly one fourth felt that the solution was a combination of all.

For more information on the President’s Family Justice Center, please visit www.usdoj.gov/ovw. For more information on the National Domestic Violence Hotline, call 1-800-799-SAFE or visit www.ndvh.org.